

CONVERSATIONS

AT THE FAMOUS COMPUTER CAFE



AN INTERVIEW WITH GENE RODENBERRY

TFCC: I know you've been involved with computer technology for a number of years going back to the beginning of Star Trek. Could you give us a sense of how you relate to personal computers and how you use them in your work?

GR: Well, starting back at the beginning, when I was first designing Star Trek, I had a high opinion of the audience, much higher than the network executives have. So I thought, I'd better design the Enterprise as much as possible as if it really worked. We knew we wouldn't get into the details of what did what, but we wanted a feeling that it was a real vessel. One of the first things we recognized was that there was, at that time, to my knowledge, nothing that would collect all the information and make use of it in the way you would have to do and at the speeds you would have to be traveling above the speed of light. Fortunately, a scientist who was working with us suggested there was this thing called a computer, and he took us to a place where there was a computer that filled a quarter of a room with an air conditioning setup to keep it cool. It was obvious immediately from talking to him that this was a primal invention, and he told us that they were already making smaller ones and ones that didn't require so much and didn't put out so much heat and so forth. For instance, there were guys out in a garage somewhere who were doing something called an "Apple" and so on. So, just as you and others I know are good at music, have good pitch and so on, I have somehow the ability to take a limited amount of information and make fairly accurate guesses what it will happen in the future with it. So we put computers aboard the starship because it was the only thing I'd ever heard of that could make a starship go, given the information it needed. This began my interest in them. Then, as a writer, when I saw them getting small enough so that an adult male could actually lift one, I wanted to have one myself, the reason being that the computer, for a writer, is nothing more or less than just a super typewriter. You can erase anything you want, you can shift stuff around in it, change names, and so forth. And so, over five years ago now (this Star Trek stuff happened way back in the sixties), I bought my first computer, which was six times what it cost today, and I've never regretted it. Let me say to your audience — don't wait to buy a computer. It reminds me of a father-in-law I had at one time, who waited for seventeen years for color to come to the television, and he lost all those years. In computers, it's the same way. Get one, use it, have fun with it. My five-year-old computer, I'm wedded to, and although I've got younger ones and faster ones, I love it — a dear old friend.

TFCC: On the Enterprise, there was the talking computer, which was voice-activated, and there was a voice synthesizer. Those things are just becoming commonplace now on a micro level. Back then, did you have a sense that these things were really going to happen, or did you think that this would be a great fantasy if it came true someday?

GR: Oh, no, I knew positively they were going to happen. One of the tricks of guessing I had was to surround yourself with very clever people, who can give you this information, and the very clever people I knew at Cal Tech and MIT and other places were telling me about chips and how they were shrinking in size and in price, so it was obvious we were going to have small, portable ones. It happened much faster than any of us guessed, even, but certainly I knew it was going to happen. It was, I realize, and am even more sure today, it is as basic a primal invention as fire or the printing press or the wheel or any of those things; our lives will never be the same because of it. What the computer actually is, in many ways, is a communication form, that operates at nearly the speed of light, which no other communication form and information-giving form does. Our lives will never be the same.

TFCC: Are you a real technical kind of guy?

GR: Everything I know about how a computer operates you could easily stuff into one ear. I do not know what goes on inside them, and I really don't care. I don't know or care what goes on inside my car engine. I know how to turn the keys, I know which buttons to push and which wheels to twist to make it do what I want it to do, and that is my interest in computers. I think it would be great to be a computer hobbyist and have fun and challenges and the puzzles of the things, but that is not my bag. My principal use of the computer is as a word processor; as I said earlier, a super typewriter, and I think that's grand. Although over the past few years, I've begun to use them more and more to access databases. Rather than go to an Encyclopedia Britannica, I just call up and ask it what it knows about saltwater crocodiles or whatever I happen to be writing about. I expect more and more to

use it to transmit manuscripts and stuff like that. I have many dear friends in science fiction writing who no longer even dream of mailing something to a publisher; they just send it to them by wire, and more of that, of course, will be going on. No, I use it as a wonderful, handy-dandy sort of machine. Nothing irritates me so much that people overcomplicate them, and use terms like — what in hell do they call the screens, uh, CRT. Now, what a stupid thing! It is a viewer. Viewer screen, that's what it is. And documentation — those are printed instructions, is what they are. Of course, this has happened always. When automobiles came out (I am, unfortunately, old enough to remember when automobiles were still sort of new), I remember how they terrorized my grandmother and grandfather. Chokes, spark, all of those things. I remember even better when radios came out, and radios were enormously complicated things that you brought in an friend to show you how to tune it. Now today, my kid wears one on his wrist, and he feels deprived because it's not a television set.

TFCC: People have talked about computers and technology as being somewhat dehumanizing, and it seems to me from what you're saying that the reverse is true in your case — that this is really allowing you to take more control over your own personal life. Do you think that it serves to enhance you as a person rather than to dehumanize you?

GR: Yes, all of these things only enable Gene Roddenberry to be more Gene Roddenberry. That old bugaboo about mechanical things dehumanizing started way back when we got the first machines, the first steam engine — driven machines. People were so afraid of them, and my God, if God meant for us to use wheels, why did he give us feet? And I think the answer to that would be so that someday you could push down on the accelerator, dummy. This has been going on for a long time, and it's very annoying to hear people say this about computers. Computers will only aid you in being more yourself, and enjoying the world more. In fact, because of computers, instead of life getting more and more complicated, it is going to get simpler and simpler, and a good test of that right now is household appliances. They are simpler to operate; they sense things and they do things they didn't use to.

TFCC: You talked earlier about databases and how you use computers, aside from word processing, to find out things, to check out encyclopedia listings. What do you think about telecommunications? Where is that bringing us?

GR: It's going very slow at this time. For some people, they seem a little disappointed. Source doesn't do all the wonderful things it would do, they say, and that's true at the moment. But you have to look at the big picture, what this represents, and what's happening. I am currently having an argument with some people at my son's school, because I want him to do more and more of his homework on his computer. He's 11 years old, and that's his life and his future, and I see no reason he has to do it in pencil and paper all the time any more than he should do it Abraham Lincoln's way with a piece of charcoal on the back of a shovel. The computer is his life.

TFCC: I know that there are a number of programs across the country that people are involved in to get computers in the schools. There's a Presidential Commission doing that, as well as private foundations. Do you think the schools are doing enough, aside from the particular one to which your son goes, and for that matter is the country doing enough for people to become educated about computers?

GR: What people must do is not to look at what computers are today as they make these decisions, but look at the things they can be. For example, we do not have computer programs that yet teach as good as a really good teacher. But this isn't going to happen for long. I can conceive of — I haven't seen it yet — but I can conceive of a telecommunications program that, using a screen and the glory of sound, color, moving image and so forth, can explain the basics of chemistry, and the whole theory of atoms, molecules and all of this, much better than Mr. Harris could in my ninth grade chemistry class. Those things will come along, and they'll be available, and we must be prepared for them. In the meantime, yes, of course, we must introduce our children to the use of computers.

TFCC: You've touched on the future and where it's going. But if we could look five or ten years down the line, where do you think we're going with personal computers and the whole technology revolution that's happening right now?

GR: They are, in a very nice way, behind our backs going to be operating our life more and more, making our life easier and easier. Of course, you get nothing

free, we must constantly be aware of the fact that computers can do evil things too — they can store and send out information about us, personal information, that we don't want to happen. It's not surprising at all some people use computers for thievery. When horses came along, they used horses for thievery. I think the important thing to understand is that the future is happening, and if we are to make use of it, we must continue happening ourselves. And that is the sense of bringing a computer into your house, if just a simple one. Play with it, accept the challenge, have fun. Hey, it's here tomorrow, there's no way out of it.

The Famous Computer Cafe broadcasts interviews with leaders in the personal computer industry as well as others involved in the world of personal computers, along with PC news from the News and Salad Bar every day in Southern California. The Famous

HOW TO BUY A PERSONAL COMPUTER

We realize that many people come to the Cafe to find out more information about personal computers so that they can gather enough reasons and enough courage to go out and buy a PC for themselves.

So we thought we would help you a bit with what kind of questions to ask and what to look for when buying a personal computer.

First, it is important to decide what you want to do with your computer once you get it. Naturally, you'll probably end up doing many different things once you've learned how to use your PC, but you should have one or two solid ideas going in. Your reasons can range from "I want to start a word processing business" to "I want to play adventure games." There's no right reason to get a computer... just be sure to know what yours is first, before you buy anything.

What you decide you want to do with your computer is going to have a lot to do with what kind of computer you buy. And when you walk into a computer store, it should be the first thing the salesman asks you. If it isn't, then you're not buying, he's selling and you should move on to the next store.

HOME COMPUTERS

In the general category of personal computers, there are two kinds: business computers and home computers. For arguments sake, we will pretend that these categories don't overlap, and we'll start by talking about the home computer. This is a computer that is designed for use primarily in the home. In general, if the computer is designed for hookup to your television monitor, then it is probably a home computer. It should also have a keyboard of some kind, built-in memory, a way to accept the games or other programs that you're going to buy... such as a disk drive or a cassette player... and possibly a joystick for playing the games.

The first thing you should know is that any computer can play games... programmers believe what they hear about all work and no play. The Apple, Commodore, and Atari computers have the most games written for them, in that order. They all have good color graphic capabilities, with the Commodore having the best of the three in our opinion, and they also all have music and sound.

A home computer will cost you anywhere from \$199 up to \$500 but that's just for the computer itself. You'll also need to buy a joystick (\$10-\$40) and you'll probably want a disk drive, which costs around \$300. If you use your TV, you won't need a color monitor, which could cost another \$300. If you're planning to only play games, you won't need a printer yet. But make sure that there is a printer available for the computer you buy because if you like computing, you'll want one eventually and last but not least, you will have to buy games... and those generally cost anywhere from \$25 to \$50, although you can get them for less.

BUSINESS COMPUTERS

Because a business computer is probably going to be a greater investment on your part of both time and money than a home computer would be, there is a lot more to take into consideration when preparing to purchase one. Therefore, our first suggestion, and it is a strong one, is to invest in the services of a computer consultant. Our experience, and the experience of many business people, has shown that money spent on a consultant will provide you with reliable advice that can help you make an informed business decision... and that is money well spent.

Whether you hire a consultant or not, you should still become knowledgeable on your own about the computer and software you intend to buy. In order to get an overall view of what is available, start by visiting computer stores. You're going to have to buy your computer from a retail store in most cases, so be on

Computer Cafe can be heard daily on KFOX 93.5 FM at 7:30 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. and on KIEV 870 AM at 3:30 p.m., which also features Infoworld columnist John Dvorak and Dr. Disk, on-air PC Consultant. The Famous Computer Cafe Presents Dr. Disk™ can be heard every Thursday night on KFOX 93.5 FM from 8:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. The Famous Computer Cafe can also be heard in the San Mateo area every Wednesday night at 7:00 p.m. on KCSM 91.1 FM.

the lookout not only for hard information, but also for friendly sales people with expertise in the hardware and software that you are interested in. Make sure to take notes. This will be very important when it comes down to buying your system. Note which stores carry what lines of computers and printers and particularly note any helpful sales people.

When you've narrowed your choice down to a few stores and one or two computers, make an appointment at the stores you like. Make the appointment with the salesperson who knows the most about your area of interest, whether it's word processing or spreadsheets, or accounting. Or ask for the person who knows the most about the particular computer system that you are interested in. When you go in for your appointment, bring something for the computer to do. If its spreadsheets you're interested in, bring along some numbers to project. If you can watch a computer and software processing your information, it will be a lot more meaningful and a lot easier to know quickly whether or not this is what you want.

When you are judging a computer, you're looking for screen clarity, the feel of the keys on the keyboard, the overall physical appearance and design, and of course, the technical specifications. Unless you are pretty savvy in the area of personal computers, your consultant should be the one to tell you what your technical requirements are, based on your volumes, and the way you do business.

Everything else is software. If you like the way a computer processes your numbers, chances are you like the program, not the computer. As Peter McWilliams says, buying a computer because you like the program is like buying a car because you like the countryside in which you took a test drive. If you do like the program, find out what other computers it runs on. Some programs run on lots of computers and some on only one.

At the appointment, or after it, try to spend some time alone with the computer if you are looking at one. Naturally, you can't expect to be a whiz on day one, but see if you feel comfortable with the computer on your own. See what questions can come up when you try to do something yourself. And keep taking notes... about your subjective feelings as well as objective observations of each computer you try out.

Before you finish your appointment, find out what kind of support this particular store provides. Find out what you would do if the computer breaks. Will the store come and set up the computer for you? Will they train you on the computer? Does any of this cost extra? Most professional computer stores do provide these services under specific guidelines, so find out what they are.

A business computer will probably cost you somewhere in the neighborhood of \$5000, depending on all sorts of things that are too numerous to go into here. Suffice it to say you will be buying, at a minimum, one computer, a keyboard, a monitor (either color or black and white), a disk drive or two, and a printer. If you intend to take advantage of communications opportunities, you will also be buying a modem and hooking the computer up to your telephone. And you will be buying software, most of which costs somewhere between \$250 and \$600. And of course, that consultant will cost money too, somewhere upwards of \$35 an hour.

When buying a personal computer, take your time and ask a lot of questions. Buying a personal computer for your business is a serious investment. Buying a home computer is an investment, too, though perhaps not quite as serious in either case, the time spent in preparing to buy your personal computer will be educational... and it might even be fun!

By Ellen Walker, Co-Host and Executive Producer of "The Famous Computer Cafe", can be heard daily at the News and Salad Bar on at 3:30 p.m. on KIEV 870 AM.